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The Role of the Humanities in Rural Community Development

by Sheila Jans

It was a simple question. A community leader of a small rural town in Maine asked, “How can the humanities help us with challenges like outmigration, strained resources, consolidation, and loss of identity?”

Answering the question may not be so simple, but striving to do so is essential. Maine is considered the nation’s most rural state with close to two-thirds of its population of 1.3 million living in rural areas.¹

Rural living can be immensely satisfying, but it would not be an exaggeration to say that many of Maine’s rural communities face a slow erosion of a way of life, their knowledge and wisdom, and sustainable means to build wealth. Parts of Maine share what other rural areas in North America face: stagnant economy, dwindling population, inability to retain and attract youth and talent, and diminishing resources. Add cutting arts and humanities in schools, along with a general atmosphere of apathy, and the result is communities in decline.

Tackling these challenges takes a lot of work and resources, including capable leadership, cooperation, and insightful development approaches. Placing art, culture, and the humanities at the center, rather than on the margins, is one of those insightful approaches. Communities that recognize these as a source of wealth and value, inevitably experience greater prosperity and a higher quality of life. Moreover, being short in artists, writers, designers, intellectuals, or engineers, means that the knowledge base for success is lacking, resulting in a dependence on ideas produced elsewhere (Venturelli 2003).

The humanities are considered the study and interpretation of literature and poetry, history, philosophy, jurisprudence, civics, and languages. Ultimately, they reflect the deep and enduring human expression of art, culture, tradition, and creativity. To effect change in our communities, we need to better understand these expressions, encourage dialogue, explore alternatives, and design insightful solutions. This is where the humanities provide enormous capacity. They are “that area of knowledge that helps us live better, not just

longer” (Indiana Humanities 2015: 6). They help develop more creative and open minds, which inspire deeper understanding, critical thinking, and the generation of ideas. In fact, the humanities are ideas. It would be irresponsible and unimaginative, let alone a lost opportunity, to leave challenges in rural Maine for “someone else” to figure out.

The role of the humanities in helping build better places to live is underscored in the *Heart of the Matter*, a seminal report about the humanities in American society. It explains that the humanities “remind us where we have been and help us envision where we are going.” They are central to shaping a stronger, more vibrant civic society, a “more adaptable and creative workforce, and a more secure nation” (AAAS 2013: 9).

Let us take a look at one of the rural areas of Maine—the St. John Valley, situated at the northernmost point of Maine next to the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick and Québec. Locally known as “the Valley,” the Maine side of the border has a population of approximately 14,000 people, mostly of French heritage (Acadian and French-Canadian). Though a distinct, independent, and culturally proud region with abundant assets and a strong sense of identity and place, it struggles with its fair share of challenges, such as isolation from the rest of Maine, outmigration, aging population, declining economy, and lack of diversity. And yet, emerging from these challenges and strengths are innumerable opportunities. The Valley, like anywhere, must generate its own ideas, find solutions that emanate from within, and create an environment conducive to creativity and innovation.

Several examples of initiatives and experiences in the region illustrate the significant role of the humanities. In 1998 the French Heritage Council at the University of Maine at Fort Kent wanted to understand how the French language, still widely spoken locally, could be leveraged for economic development and trade opportunities with Canada and other French-speaking countries of the world. The result was a day-long conference called *Connexions Affaires* (business

connections), which brought together business people, nonprofits, government agencies, artists, and scholars, from both sides of the international border. Certainly before and since this conference, the French language in the Valley has been studied, written about, and celebrated. Nevertheless, language, perhaps the most fundamental human expression, can sometimes be overlooked and taken for granted. For *Connexions Affaires*, the focus was on language as a powerful, inherent asset with practical applications. (See Smith 2015.)

One of the speakers at this conference was historian Don Cyr, the director of the Musée culturel du Mont-Carmel, situated in Lille, a charming agrarian village along the St. John River (<http://www.museeculturel.org>). For over 30 years, Cyr has led the restoration of a former Catholic Church, which functions as a museum and cultural center (Figure 1). It is here, in this so-called isolated and remote part of the United States, that the humanities are generously present. It comes alive with the museum's collection and presentations about folk traditions and vernacular architecture; classical music by a New York City ensemble; a film discussion by a Canadian experimental art filmmaker who lives minutes from the border; foot-stomping Irish music by a trio from Portland; an award-winning theatrical performance about Maine and taxes; and a national exhibition about the history and glory of barns.

It was here that Maine's poet laureate read his poetry on a chilly autumn evening to an international audience and where original French songs were sung by a world-renowned Acadian singer from Moncton, New Brunswick. Though audiences tend to be small and the lack of funding is always an issue, the Musée culturel du Mont-Carmel represents something that every rural community needs—a place where one can directly experience the past and the contemporary, blended with the everyday and the sublime of human creativity and expression.

Indeed, it is the unexpected, the seemingly unremarkable, that can most often inspire and motivate us. Such is what happens during a scholar-facilitated book discussion, called "Let's Talk About It," designed by the Maine Humanities Council.² Once a month about 20 people sit together for a couple hours to discuss a book at the library in Ste. Agathe, a little town nestled beside beautiful Long Lake. In fact, all kinds of books, from *The Maine Woods* to *All Quiet on the Western Front* have been read and discussed in this free program. Something interesting happens during those two hours—the book's narrative becomes the starting point for thought-provoking and illuminating discussions between people of varying ages with different life experiences.

Conversations around a book series about wilderness, for example, stretched beyond theoretical concepts of caring for place and the way of the wild, to relevant issues affecting the Valley, or elsewhere in current events, such as the disastrous oil spill affecting the southern United States at the time. The significance of this kind of humanities program is that rarely do everyday people sit together with intention to explore profound and universal issues like racism, war, labor unions, love, environmental threats, economic disparity, or cultural identity.

There is immense value in a facilitated format that provides something close to a sacred space to discuss what composes our lives that may be inspiring, divisive, or deeply troubling, all in the quest for greater understanding. People

FIGURE 1: Performers at the Musée culturel du Mont-Carmel



stretch their minds; they learn and unlearn. Understanding happens, and from that, possibilities for growth and cooperation. Who sits in on a book discussion? Retirees, educators, legislators, community leaders, conservationists, homemakers, hairdressers—people from all walks of life, from their twenties to their nineties. A new community emerges.

One of the more sensitive matters facing the St. John Valley is particularly inescapable and omnipresent: the international border. In 1842 the St. John River was established as the boundary between the United States and Canada, dividing families and changing the way of life. Maine's St. John Valley was originally part of a three-area geographic family, which included the Témiscouata region of southeastern Québec and the Upper St. John River Valley of northwestern New Brunswick. This was the Madawaska Settlement, home to native peoples, French-Canadians, Acadians, and Scots-Irish. At first, and for many decades, the presence of the border was bothersome, but tolerable. Today, it has become more of a barrier and emotional concern. On the one hand it negatively affects the Valley's transnational economic, social, and cultural fiber, but on the other, it could be a means for social, cultural, and economic integration and progress.

It is precisely this paradox that was explored in a 2011 community discussion organized by Valley residents and the Maine Humanities Council called "What Do Borders Mean?" It is not uncommon for people living on the border in northern Maine to become mired in the frustrations of crossing over—the restriction of a natural interface between people, numerous laws and regulations, an oppressive Orwellian feeling. Without sublimating these real feelings, the conversation was shaped more about how borders are created in all parts of life, literally and figuratively.

The three-hour conversation started with a presentation by a scholar, followed by a reading of poetry, and a facilitated discussion. The diverse and international group of about 25 people explored what it means to live along the border, and how borders in general—from geopolitical to gender or cultural ones—affect lives, test tolerance, or create the feeling of *other*. This effective civic engagement employed a humanities approach to gain new perspectives and seek insight into the complexity of an intensely felt and shared regional experience.

A couple years after this community discussion, an initiative took shape that examined more deeply what living along this international border means to the

people who call it home. The National Endowment for the Humanities' (NEH) Summer Institute called "Borders and Borderlands: the Acadian Experience in Maine," organized by the Maine Humanities Council, was held in the St. John Valley shortly before the *Congrès mondiale acadien* (World Acadian Congress), an event that attracted tens of thousands of Acadians from around the world to northern Maine and the provinces of New Brunswick and Québec in August 2014 (<http://cma2014.com/en/>).

Among the many visitors were 25 teachers (K–12) from across the United States who had been selected to participate in the NEH's Summer Institute. Their program began with three weeks of scholar-led lectures, readings, and discussion in Orono, Maine, then Moncton, and concluded in the St. John Valley on the eve of the *Congrès mondiale acadien*. They read history, literature, saw films, heard from scholars and artisans; they enjoyed local cuisine, danced to traditional music, and listened to personal stories of people who live in the Valley.³ For example, in a panel called "On the Border in the 21st Century," four people from both countries talked about what it means to live on the border today. Of varying ages and backgrounds, they shared their perspective about how the international boundary has shaped their personal sense of identity and place—how it makes its presence felt to them.

Chace Jackson was one of the panelists. He grew up in Allagash, a small town in the western part of the Valley, renowned for its Scots-Irish heritage, deep forests, and wild rivers. Jackson is passionate about the place he calls home. Thanks to the NEH's institute, "we sent excited scholars back into the world eager to talk about our diverse and unique cultural heritages," he exclaims. "I'll always appreciate the chance I had to peel back the obvious of the Valley and speak to what might need deeper observation."

The panel discussion set the stage for more intimate conversations with local residents. Through oral history interviews conducted in French or English, teachers immersed themselves into the lives of people from both sides of the border. Rachelle DeFarges from the small community of St. David, Maine, was one of the 30 people interviewed. She considers telling her story "is a way to share a perspective and sense of humanity about living within the larger events of our times and the resulting cultural reverberations." Being interviewed was about connection: "It was an interesting experience being the one telling a story; to be listened to with such

care.” For Diane Pelletier of the Malécite First Nations across the border in Edmundston, New Brunswick, she was reminded about how special it was to grow up along the St. John River. For her, the interview was like a pathway to “give thanks for what is here and to always remember where you come from.” Home for these rich and diverse oral history interviews is the Acadian Archives at the University of Maine at Fort Kent (<https://www.umfk.edu/archives/>).

The voices of the local residents who participated in the NEH’s Summer Institute are the truth of the St. John Valley. They helped shape a genuine learning experience with long-lasting impact. The significance of this initiative is that through the humanities, these teachers breathed in this place and culture. They gained intimate insight into a world they knew little about. Understanding moved beyond the theoretical to the perceptible and immediate. Returning to their classrooms in Louisiana, California, Maine, and other states, their learning will benefit the students they teach.

This sense of breathing in a culture and place is the foundation for the *Voici* the Valley Cultureway, an international cultural touring experience that follows roads on both sides of the St. John River where northern Maine meets New Brunswick.⁴ An 80-minute audio cultural documentary tells a story about the international region’s history, culture, traditions, and French language, through narration, music, and the voices of local residents. In addition, a guidebook shares details about points of interest in communities as one travels along the 100-mile cultureway.

The *Voici* the Valley Cultureway built upon efforts of many local individuals, historical organizations, cultural groups, and ethnographic studies by the National Park Service. It also inspired extensive research on the region’s creative economy, the designation of the region as a State Scenic Byway, and many other initiatives.⁵ Upon first impression, the cultureway sounds like an exciting and experiential place-based cultural tourism product. And it is. But it grew out of something even more foundational, and that was to address the slow erosion of traditions, raise the value of arts and culture, link communities through intrinsic assets, and foster economic growth. It also recognized that the French language is of this region. *Voici* the Valley is a tangible and accessible manifestation of the humanities through its interpretation and celebration of history, art, culture, and place.

These examples illustrate diverse ways that humanities-based initiatives play a role in addressing issues in

the St. John Valley of northern Maine. They emerged from the source, initiated by the people of the Valley, and were made possible through the support of various national and state agencies. Though substantive and successful, these examples represent the exception, not the norm. The Valley, not unlike many rural communities throughout Maine, experiences a shortfall when it comes to humanities programming, which tends to be sporadic, inconsistent, and vulnerable to a scarcity of funding and lack of leadership at all levels.

Regardless of these and other obstacles, the humanities can still strategically address societal, cultural, and economic challenges across Maine and especially in its rural communities. The door is wide open for those of us working in the humanities-related field to take an intentional and decisive step forward. A great place to lead is to design a humanities-based program for rural areas that strategically merges theory, research, and best practices, with adaptive, on-the-ground, and practical application.

For example, Project Cultivate, an initiative that grew out of research of the St. John Valley’s creative economy, is about cultivating creative thinkers, supporting great ideas, and building a more prosperous region through culture and place. One of its components focuses directly on the cultivation of a creative mindset. Besides the urgent need to deal with the retention and attraction of youth and talent, negative attitudes associated with making a living in the region need to be tackled. Opportunities must be created. Through an intensive educational series for grades 9–12, principles of innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurialism, would be taught, along with concepts of quality, value, good design, and how to evolve an idea into a tangible form. The aim is to nurture a shift in mindset from “there are no jobs here, so I can’t stay or can’t come back” to “anything is possible here.”

Since humanities can be somewhat of an elusive term, I suggest we work on making it more understandable, accessible, and visible. The humanities sector must also endeavor to overcome false perceptions that it operates in a collective silo, elite and unattainable, separate from everyday lives and from other disciplines and activities. Further, we should reward and support those individuals and entities that have been working tirelessly and vigorously to promote and integrate the arts, culture, and humanities into rural communities. It is crucial to recognize those on the ground who have been part of the journey for the long haul. And finally,

restrain expectations for immediate results and recognize the enduring benefits from a rural-focused humanities strategy.

It would not be a stretch to say that something transformative will happen when the humanities is integrated more deliberately into our communities. Some short-term results in our rural towns would include more cooperation, active listening, and constructive discourse. Over time, we would see a greater ability for people to find solutions to seemingly entrenched problems, more productive town meetings, forward-thinking comprehensive plans, and the resolution of tensions between townspeople, school boards, town offices, and police officers. In the long term, we can expect to keep and attract talent, inspire visionary leadership, shape insightful policy, and foster a more vibrant economy by leveraging intrinsic assets. Ultimately, we would savor and reap the profits of transformative creativity and expression unleashed by valuing and prioritizing the humanities.

If we can agree that the humanities “embrace the great and enduring human values of justice, freedom, equality, virtue, beauty, and truth,” then hopefully what follows is to heed the sober advice that “without deliberate cultivation of the humanities in the public sphere, we risk losing sight of these values” (Adams 2015). The humanities offer unlimited ways to shape a new dialogue and can redefine our rural communities. They can be used as a tool to help with challenges by being on the ground with sleeves rolled up to tackle everyday problems; being present enough to help us grapple with larger conceptual issues, and by soaring with us to explore what it means to be human. Living better, striving to live better, and organizing our thinking to live better—are what the humanities help us to do. 🐟

ENDNOTES

1. 2010 census from “Census, Maine Most Rural State”, Mainebiz, March 27, 2012. <http://www.mainebiz.biz/article/20120327/NEWS0101/120329959/census:-maine-most-rural-state>
2. More information about the Maine Humanities Council’s Let’s Talk About It program is available on its website: <http://mainehumanities.org/program/lets-talk-about-it/>
3. More information about the NEH’s Summer Institute can be found at this website: <http://mainehumanities.org/program/borders-borderlands-acadian-experience-maine/>
4. *Voici the Valley* means “here is the valley,” a name that reflects the region’s bilingual nature (<http://www.voicethevalley.org>).
5. The St. John Valley is home to the state’s first cultural byway under the Maine Scenic Byway program. For creative economy research, see Jans, Hunt, and Noblet (2010).

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